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LESSONS FROM PALESTINIAN HISTORY

by

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The recent statement of the Iranian President concerning Israel caused some reaction. Even the UN Secretary General responded by announcing that he was shocked. Mr. Annan may take the remark less disturbedly if he can probe into the discussions, held during the British Mandatory era (1922-48), about parity, bi-nationalism, federalism, cantonization, and the like in Palestine. There exists a wealth of information on the idea of one-state in historic Palestine for Muslim and Christian Arabs, Jews and the rest.

Those who are familiar with the history of the Palestine problem are aware that some intellectuals, mostly Jews, but also Arabs, British and Americans, considered the idea of one-state for all inhabitants as a just and possible solution for the impasse, then and now. A thorough study of the history of this idea is again topical. Personally, I participated in an international conference, held in Lausanne in mid-2004, which concentrated solely on this alternative. The bi-national solution, which had not envisaged a separate and independent state for the Jews, was introduced and freely discussed for the whole duration of the Mandate years, before which Palestine was an integral part of the Ottoman Empire.

During the four centuries-long Ottoman administration, there had been no Israel, but the coexistence of all without any sanguinary conflict. The Muslims, Christians, and the Jews shared a common life, with freedom to live, travel, and work in any part of the large state. All inhabitants enjoyed certain rights, and respected the freedom of the other communities. In contrast, concrete experience, since the beginning of the Jewish influx into Palestine, and especially since the creation of Israel, teaches us that two separate states in this small piece of land did not prove to be a success. There is bloodshed there every day, and every hour. It is unfortunate that this description happens to be the sum and substance of the last 57 years.

Before 1948, the idea of a future Palestine as one bi-national state was one of the alternatives. The development of this notion may be traced to Jewish activists above all. Additionally, there were external origins of the same idea, such as the Swiss example. A similar theory was developed by a few Austrians as a satisfactory solution for the Habsburg Empire. The annals of history are, consequently, full of projects applicable at federal and local levels in Palestine. None of these plans favoured a solely Jewish state, but a common Palestinian community that would open the country to all its citizens. For decades, mostly Jews, and others as well, considered the feasibility of various formulas that would unite the adherents of different religions or nations under the same administrative umbrella. Their advocates believed that their choice was more workable than a single Israeli state.

Starting with A. Haam, A.D. Gordon and M. Buber, early Zionist leaders offered forceful arguments favouring the bi-national idea. Haam specifically stated that the rights of the Jews “did not invalidate the right of the rest of the land’s inhabitants who had a genuine right of residence and work.” This made Palestine, he said, “a common possession.” Gordon, who called on the Jews not to build themselves at the expense of the Arabs, believed in cooperation and partnership. Buber saw the danger in the Jews coming to Palestine “behind the bayonets of an imperialist power.” In Dr. Isaac Epstein’s opinion, the Zionist movement left out a very important problem – the existence of a whole people, the Palestinian Arabs.

Likewise, Jewish professors H. Bergmann, H. Kohn and R. Weltsch, all from the multi-national reality of the Habsburg Empire, were influenced by Martin Buber’s bi-nationalist angle. Some other Jews supported “Palestinism,” or the merging of two nations to create a new nationality, like the old pre-Biblical Canaanite one. A group of Jewish intellectuals, around Yonathan Ratosh, advocated Palestinism in the late 1930s. Uri Avneri, too, suggested in the Israeli Knesset a Palestinian solution – “a national conscience standing above both the Arab and Jewish consciences.” Dr. A. Ruppin from the Brit Shalom group stated that Palestine would be “a state of two nations.” C.M. Kalvarisky prepared a document that stressed the following: “Palestine is the country of all her residents.” Judah L. Magnes, the Chancellor of Hebrew University, said that Palestine ought to be “not a Jewish state, but a bi-national country.” He added: “The Jewish people does not need a Jewish state to maintain its existence.” He further noted: “Arab friendship for the Jews must be more important than to hold on millions of acres of land.”

The same trend continued in the 1930s and ‘40s: The bi-nationalists recorded that the country was too small for a multiplicity of states. The Kedma Mizrah organization declared that the Jews had to “live in peace with the Arabs.” A Jewish left wing group, Hashomer Hatzair, advocated bi-nationalism from 1929 to 1948. Shlomo Kaplansky was the first to mention parity, a Federative Council and equal representation in the Senate. Dr. C. Arlozoroff underlined “a common state.” Even Dr. Chaim Weizmann, Israel’s first President, uttered several statements in support of bi-nationality. Ben Gurion, Israel’s first Prime Minister, initially opted for a federal state in Palestine. The socialist members of the MAPAI party supported the same idea. Shlomo Zviolnikov said that it meant “not two states, but one uniform state for both nations.” Moshe Shertok saw parity as “the most equitable solution.” Ben Avi suggested “the Federal State of Palestine.” Most serious cantonization plans came from Dr. V. Jacobson. Individuals like him even referred to a “Middle Eastern Federation.” There existed several maps showing cantonization plans.

All of these sources underlined that the Palestinian reality necessitated the setting up of a shared Arab-Jewish administration. They commanded respect, but they had no power and no wide influence. The majority of the Jewish leadership, on the other hand, considered all attempts towards partnership with the Arabs to be a policy of concessions. Hitler and Nazism strengthened the unwillingness of the Jewish majority to compromise. In the end, outside forces decided.

Brit Shalom, which brought out its own periodical (“Our Aspirations”), then conceded that the Arabs were justified for opposing Zionism that spoke in terms of a Jewish state. For the overwhelming majority of the Arabs, Palestine was to remain a predominantly Arab land. Some Arabs, differed, however, from this

mainstream. For instance, a group of Syrians around Dr. Abdur Rahman Shahbandar, shared the bi-national inclination. Nuri Said Pasha, Iraq's Foreign Minister, was sympathetic to it. Tawfik Suwaidi, another Iraqi Foreign Minister, envisaged 14 Arab and 7 Jewish cantons in united Palestine. Omar Saleh el-Barghutti, a prominent Jerusalem lawyer, was acting as a go between trying to bring the like-minded Arab and Jewish groups together.

Similar ideas were formulated even in the British White Book in 1922 that came to be known under Churchill's name but whose actual author was Herbert Samuel, a British Jew and the Mandate's first High Commissioner. After 1935, cantonization plans were also in vogue in Britain. The UK Peel Commission Report dwelled on parity and proposed partition, which the UK Woodhead Commission later rejected. Sir John Philby came out with plans of parity in the same state. Albert M. Hyamson, a non-Zionist English Jew, and Col. S. F. Newcombe, a pro-Arab Englishman, produced a common plan which may be termed a bi-national solution. The Morrison-Grady and the Bevin Plans, sympathetic towards the bi-nationalists, were not allowed to materialize.

While the Jewish American pressure group exerted its massive influence in favour of a Jewish state in Palestine, quite a few American Jews, even after the experience of the Nazi Holocaust, had been against it. For instance, the American Council for Judaism (ACJ) was an American-Jewish organization that was formed for the purpose of challenging Zionism and opposing the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Rabbi Elmer Berger was the central figure in ACJ's history. Further, the Jewish American judge B. Rosenblatt developed a project for a federal state. Another Jewish-American, Miss Henrietta Szold, who had established medical facilities in Palestine, also objected to a single Jewish state. But the ACJ lost the contest, the most important reason being the impact of the Holocaust. The Jews became receptive to the message of the Zionists. Despite the ACJ's losing battle against Zionism, many of its predictions came true. The seeds of a long struggle, including recurring wars, were created, and Israel itself became a garrison state and a blood-soaked country in the eyes of many observers.

In the light of the statements quoted above, the Iranian President is not an isolated individual with a remark that has no resemblance in the history of the Palestine question. He is, in fact, another link in the chain of prophetic dissents and predictions since the early 1920s that still haunt the 1947-48 enterprise.
